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AUTHOR Gong, Gwendolyn
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ABSTRACT

Education in Hong Kong has been developed along a British model that uses examination results to determine students' academic futures: to be allowed to go on to a university to study or to go into the workplace with a tenth-grade education. The system has been described by likening students to Peking ducks who are forced to eat, fattened up for someone else's table. Similarly, students are stuffed with information from books by way of rote learning, and memorization. Students are not allowed to comment or question the information. Thus Hong Kong's tertiary students enter universities with an ability to receive information, but little or no experience in independent or critical thinking. Among the strategies that teachers can use to help their students better prepare for the future and avoid becoming Peking ducks: create and maintain student-centered learning environments; design prompts as rhetorical scenarios dealing with contemporary social, political, and economic issues; and incorporate problem-based learning pedagogy/strategies. (Contains 10 references.) (CR)

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NO MORE PEKING DUCKS IN HONG KONG:
PROVOKING CRITICAL THINKING THROUGH "SUBVERSIVE TEACHING"

Gwendolyn Gong

The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Introduction: The Problem of the Peking Duck

Education in Hong Kong has been developed along a British model that uses examination results to determine students' academic futures: to be allowed to go on to a university to study or to go into the workplace with a tenth-grade education. Ice, one of my writing students, describes this system:

> It is like we are Peking ducks who are forced to eat—fattened up for someone else's table. Similarly, we students are expected to open our mouths, and then we are stuffed and stuffed and stuffed with information from books—rote learning, memorization. We are not allowed to comment, question, or refuse the information; we have to cover everything on a standard syllabus for each course, based on the examination for each kind of test, so there is no time for us to discuss or think about ideas anyway. This kind of education is just passive learning to take tests.

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As this quotation illustrates, Hong Kong tertiary students enter universities with a great ability to "receive" information, but with little or no experience in how to think critically and independently. For this reason, educators of these students must devote much of their time trying to foster student interest and confidence in becoming creative problem solvers and active participants in—not simply consumers or (Peking ducks) of information about—issues and changes in their daily lives and the world around them.

Higher Education in Hong Kong: A Brief Overview

Hong Kong's children are today required to stay in school until the age of 15 or the end of secondary 3, whichever is earlier (10th grade). This has only been true, however, since 1978, and some 46% of the population aged 25 and above have received no secondary schooling. After secondary 3, some children currently abandon formal education while others join craft and technician courses, but about 91% choose to stay at school for another two years. They follow curricula leading to the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE). The schools in which the children study fall into three groups: government schools (8%); aided schools, largely funded by the government but managed by voluntary bodies (77%); and private schools (15%). There are three-year vocational schools and three-year teacher education courses of study as well.

Currently, according to the University Grants Committee (UGC), 38% of children stay at school after secondary 5 (HKCEE) and take two year sixth form courses leading to the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examinations (HKALE). Students with appropriate grades on HKALE may then enter three-year diploma or first-degree

courses or two-year courses for teacher education. Those gaining first degrees or the equivalent may subsequently be admitted to taught higher degrees or may undertake research for a Master's degree or doctorate.

Given this context for understanding higher education in Hong Kong, let's consider how students coming from this system do when they enter universities. In a recent study called *the Preparation of Students for Tertiary Education (POSTE), :*Professor Cheng Kai-ming, one of the researchers from the University of Hong Kong, writes:

> Respondents to the study felt that the formal curriculum was overloaded with factual material and that there was insufficient development of analytical and critical skills. . . . the aims of the Curriculum Development Council for inculcating creative thinking and rational and independent decision making are unlikely to be realized.
>
> . . . Perhaps the most important and disturbing result from the POSTE report was the authors' conclusion that teachers in secondary and in tertiary education may have very little understanding of each other's needs and contributions. Secondary teachers may not understand what attributes higher education institutions would like to find in their entrants, and tertiary teachers may have little knowledge about current activities in sixth forms. . . .

With this lack of understanding between secondary and tertiary educators, it is imperative that teachers begin to bridge this gap. Until this happens, however, students will continue to suffer. It falls on the shoulders of teachers to "catch" their students in the meantime, saving them from losing their sense of curiosity while in the educational system and from being Peking ducks.

Hong Kong's Future

Hong Kong will be handed over to the People's Republic of China on July 1, 1997. Given the political, economic, social, and ethnic realities that this change in sovereignty will inevitably bring, the youth in Hong Kong must stop being Peking ducks. And they can achieve this conversion in part with the help of teachers across disciplines, wherever they are learning: in Asia, North American, Europe, etc. It is increasingly important and ethical that educationists who teach Hong Kong students—albeit all students—to empower them to use their minds and raise their voices logically and effectively, rather than to pragmatically cram random material down their throats.

Ways to Address the Problem

Below is a list of strategies that teachers can use to help their students better prepare for the future and avoid becoming Peking ducks:

- Create and maintain student-centered learning environments

- Integrate technology into courses as much as possible (Daedalus, e-mail, WWW, etc.)
- Design prompts as rhetorical scenarios that deal with contemporary social, political, economic issues and contexts for daily life
- Incorporate problem-based learning pedagogy/strategies as appropriate
- Develop interactive and provocative rhetorical situations for role playing
- Provide an understanding of how our world is socially constructing realities and how truth is dynamic

Conclusion: No More Peking Ducks, Please

According to Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner in their classic text, Teaching as a Subversive Activity (1969),

> What is the necessary business of schools? To create eager consumers? To transmit the dead ideas, values, metaphors, and information of [a century] ago? To create smoothly functioning bureaucrats? These aims are truly subversive since they undermine our chances of surviving as a viable, democratic society. And they do their work in the name of convention and standard practice. We would like to see the schools go into the anti-entropy business. Now, that is subversive, too. But the purpose is to subvert attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions that foster chaos and uselessness. (p. 15)

No more Peking ducks, please. The order of the day is "subversive teaching" to transform our ducks as receptacles into individuals as responsible, informed, and engaged citizens who can critically think, communicate, and act.

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